



Ludwig van Beethoven: Complete Works for Cello and Piano

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THE CLASSICAL REVIEW

Double Review: Beethoven – Cello Sonatas – Marc Coppey, Leonard Elschenbroich

The Beethoven Cello Sonatas discography has always been very generous, yet these sonatas still stand somewhat in the shadow of Beethoven's other chamber cycles. This past few weeks saw two new releases of the complete Cello Sonatas. Marc Coppey (Cello) and Peter Laul (Piano) on the Audite label are adding the complete variations for the duo instruments, while Leonard Elschenbroich (Cello) and Alexei Grynyuk (Piano) on Onyx are adding the Sonata Op. 17, originally for horn and piano.

Comparing the two cycles are a rewarding experience. First, these are two highly impressive and enjoyable performances. Coppey and Laul are recorded live at St Petersburg Philharmonia, and their performances are the more spontaneous-sounding of the two. Coppey's voice has an emotional intensity that shines through even in the classical influenced Op. 5 sonatas. Laul is attuned to the dramatic contrasts in Beethoven's piano writing and his sharp attacks are effectively conveyed when called for.

Turning to Elschenbroich and Grynyuk in the early sonatas, and you'd find a more reserved, even refined playing, with broader tempos and emotional projection in check. There is more patience in their transition from the slow introductions to the faster allegros on both of the Op. 5 sonatas. Grynyuk's playing is honestly and simply conveyed, and the balance between the pair is superb. The results, though, is less exciting than Coppey et Laul, or less unpredictable, depending on your taste.

Elschenbroich and Grynyuk let loose some in the Op. 69, with a highly successful account of the most famous piece of the cycle. They make the best of the short Bach quote from St. Johannes Passion at the beginning of the development section, clearly see it as the highlight of the first movement. Turn to Coppey and Laul and you'll meet an even more tumultuous Op. 69, where the development section is played with sharp attacks and direct tone that's hard to resist. Not everyone will be convinced by the slowing down at the beginning of the Bach quote, though (6:45, track 1 in the second CD). Overall, it's the same conundrum – Coppey and Laul are



more charged with energy and with what sounds like on-the-spot decisions, while Elschenbroich and Grynyuk are calmer, organized and planned, their musical ideas projected with more subtleness. Coppey and Laul are apt for more humor in the Scherzo too, while Elschenbroich and Grynyuk are more nervous.

Elschenbroich and Grynyuk's more reserved approach is very suitable to their take on the late Op. 102 sonatas. This is also where Grynyuk is at his best – Listen to his superb voicing at 0:55 of the last sonata's slow movement. Coppey and Laul's more public approach, quite literally, takes away from the music's inwardness. Yet the fugue that finishes the cycle is prepared with a suspenseful grin, in contrast to, yet again, the seriousness of Elschenbroich and Grynyuk.

Another two impressive additions to a tough competitive catalog, then. The live set is exciting as any, with a recording that is transparent yet tends to the edginess in the loud passages. Elschenbroich and Grynyuk are better and more intimately recorded at the studio, with a more steady, reflective approach. Both deserve your attention, along with highly successful alternatives (linked below) – namely Miklós Perényi and András Schiff (ECM), Alfred Brendel and son Adrian on Phillips/Decca and Xavier Phillips and François-Frédéric Guy on little Tribeca. Not to mention the legendaries accounts by Mstislav Rostropovich and Sviatoslav Richter, or Pablo Casals' early cycle released by Naxos.

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Tal Agam - May 13, 2019



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